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Tough Enough?

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TOUGH

Studies are showing that the next generation may not be learning the lesson they need most: how to become resilient adults. The Duke Endowment—and Furman—investigate.

By Martha Anne Tudor
Photography by Cig Harvey

A

"Academic culture shock" is how **Plicca Watt**, a 19-year-old sophomore at Furman, describes her entry to college.

Rolling into her freshman year with a high school GPA of 4.3, Watt was used to a tight schedule of golf practices, band performances, club meetings, French lessons, and tutoring (she was the one being tutored: for college readiness tests). She began receiving treatment for anxiety in the eleventh grade.

"I was trying to be perfect, to do what's not humanly possible," she says. "It would've helped if someone explained to me you don't have to win [it] all. That it's okay to not be okay all the time."

Watt made her first appointment with a Furman counselor her freshman year—before classes had even started.

Briana Jackson, 19, a junior at Duke University, was besieged with self-doubt when her college experience dismantled her identity as an academic standout.

"The things you thought you were good at, you find out you're not that good at," she says. "It's kind of a shock. I didn't know I was going to have to compete this way."

Jackson describes how she had a knack for science. "It was always something I'd known about myself. I made a perfect score on the (Florida) state science exam. I haven't made an A in any science class [at Duke] yet. I knew college would be harder, but not this much harder. You can spiral here from the competition and feelings of inadequacy."

Over-programmed since preschool yet underprepared for life's realities, college students are reeling from a mix of brutal pressures and overinvolved parents that experts say impairs mental health and creativity.

Jackson's experience confirms increasing fears on the part of educators that college—where adulthood is first encountered—has become a pressure cooker not conducive to real achievement, but rather to undermining the creativity that fosters achievement both in and beyond it.

"It's not a system set up for exploring," Jackson says. A biology major, she regrets taking classes in Roman history and engineering.

"We're destroying young people's souls," says Dr. Corey Keyes, a leader in the field of positive psychology and professor of sociology at Emory University. "From the time they enter middle school, it's all about getting into college. They come into college with the idea they're only loved and accepted if they get perfect grades."

Parents too ready to step in, heavily scheduled growing years, and the every-child-gets-a-trophy movement can produce young adults scared to make independent decisions, unclear how to use unstructured time, unrealistic about their own abilities, and ill-equipped for competition in the world beyond high school, say educators and researchers.

"Larger numbers of students are coming to us having never experienced failure and expecting perfection," says Connie Carson, vice president of Furman University Student Life. "These students have performed well academically, but at college everyone has

ENOUGH?



performed well. You're going to hit a wall."

Thrust early on into a results-focused process that defies the grade point average and undervalues time for self-reflection, character development, and exploring new interests, students are flooding counseling centers in surprising numbers.

"I've had enough of it," says Mary Dorine Roehre, 21, who left Davidson College last spring after her junior year. "Everyone's trying to be number one. We're all used to being the smartest person in our class. I just want to be an average person," says Roehre, who was salutatorian of her private prep school and hopes to be a nurse.

Anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and self-harm behaviors are at record levels at colleges and universities across the country. The number of students seeking counseling has tripled in the last 10 years, after doubling in the 10 years before that, and that trend continues to increase at a rate that has educators stopping to take notice. What's more, many freshmen arrive at college already in poor emotional health, according to the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors.

Some of the increase may be the result of fewer stigmas around mental health issues. There's also the factor of convenience, but of those seeking counseling at college, 37.4 percent have severe psychological problems, a remarkable increase from just 16 percent in 2000, according to a study by the American College Counseling Association. Three out of four counselors surveyed reported a rise in the last five years in crises requiring immediate action; 42 percent noted increase in self-injury; and 24 percent saw an increase in eating disorders.

At Furman, the counseling center has doubled its staff in the last 10 years, from two to five counselors, and added nine to 12 hours a week of contracted services by board-certified psychiatrists to accommodate a surge in student visits mirroring the national trend. Twelve to 15 sessions of counseling at the university are free, but if a student requires more than that, the counseling center will refer him/her to practicing psychiatrists in the Greenville area.

"Our students are starting to break down because they're the canaries in the coal mine," says Keyes, whose work has helped prompt a Duke Endowment-funded \$3.4 million study into college student resiliency. Starting with freshmen entering college this fall, the study—named The Resiliency Project—will initially canvas thousands of students and parents before narrowing the focus over the next three to four years to 400 selected students at Furman and approximately 1,200 total from the three other schools supported by the endowment: Duke University, Davidson College, and Johnson C. Smith University.

The study is also unusual in its pairing of research and application. At Furman, the faculty researchers and student affairs staff members are working side by side on all aspects of research and intervention strategies so that what emerges will create a seamless in-class/out-of-class model for well-being, self-care, and resiliency building.

Susan McConnell, director of higher education for The Duke Endowment, believes the study will lead to "interventions [that] will hopefully change campus cultures so that healthy responses to adversity and stress, rather than unhealthy responses, become the norm."

Researchers for The Resiliency Project—and specifically Furman's branch of it, named "The Fourtitude Project: Four Universities, Four Years, For You"—will look at everything from student sleep patterns and relationships with parents, to life values and types of

personalities. The goal, according to Dr. Beth Pontari, is to better understand this generation's needs and behaviors, including why some handle stress better than others. Pontari is an associate professor and department chair of psychology at Furman, and a researcher for the study.

Pontari says the grant that funds the study provides latitude for researchers at each school to zero in on trends or issues as they become apparent. Five areas of focus in the project have already been established, with the goal of determining:

1. How students make choices as to which careers, colleges, and relationships to enter
2. What expectations and assumptions influence students' personal choices and reactions to events
3. Which goal-directed behaviors increase or decrease student self-regulation
4. How students use available resources—personal, social, and institutional—to promote healthy overall adjustment
5. How students cope with threats and challenges emotionally and behaviorally

Pontari says the findings will be shared with other educational institutions across the United States and will ultimately result in the development of new campus services and changes in existing ones to help students not only avoid mental illness setbacks but also to flourish.

"It's incredibly satisfying, it's exciting and rare to do research that will result directly in services that benefit our actual students," Pontari says, noting a lot of research ends up in journals and not in the kind of real help this project's findings will launch.

At Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, there's also been an increase in counseling need, but the struggles are different from those experienced through privilege. The predominately minority student body at Johnson C. Smith are often the first in their families to study beyond high school, and many students have grown up in the trauma and chaos of poverty, homelessness, and substance abuse. It is a world that can be drastically different from their overprotected peers at other institutions.

"It can be tough on both ends. To have been spoon-fed and to grow up without even the basics," says Frederick Murphy, who has seen a 45 percent increase in students seeking mental health services in the four years he's been director of the counseling center at Johnson C. Smith.

Many of the students Murphy sees are suffering from serious mental illnesses and other conditions undiagnosed and unrecognized due to lack of education and stigmas prevalent among African Americans and Hispanics.

He has worked to increase awareness of the center's services on campus. Students seen at the center often do not have insurance, and he says finding mental health providers willing to treat them on a sliding scale is not easy.

On top of that, years of struggling to simply survive can make it difficult for students to find the motivation to succeed. But Murphy says those struggles can also be

We asked the Furman community on social media what they believe fosters resiliency?

"Surround yourself with people who will encourage you to fight for what you want, even when it seems impossible."

the very force that pushes some individuals past otherwise hopeless situations.

"These students have a no-quit attitude. A lot of our students look at [college] as an opportunity to change their circumstances, to show resiliency, to show how great they can be," he says.

Keyes says that no matter the background or the nature of the struggles a student may face, prevention is the answer, as the lack of resiliency is too pervasive to address only after troubles develop. "We can't treat this problem away," he says, stressing the importance of boosting overarching mental health so that students don't get to the point of needing professional help when they do encounter setbacks and stress.

"Higher ed needs to look at itself. We've created unsustainable expectations and a system that reflects our preoccupation with success."

Part of the problem may be that since toddlerhood, today's students are heralded for achievements previous generations deemed average. Now, students are stunned to find themselves in the middle of the pack at college, where previously award-winning efforts are now barely enough to stay afloat.

Says Watt, the Furman sophomore who experienced culture shock: "My counselor helped me see that trying to get all A's isn't the healthiest thing. Classes are so difficult here. If I'd held on to that high school standard, I wouldn't know what to do with myself."

Jeremy Lee, 20, a junior at Duke and valedictorian of his high school class, changed his mind about pursuing a minor in computer science when his roommate described the classes as time-consuming and difficult. "I was scared that I wouldn't be able to perform good enough and that the effect on my grades might hurt my future."

According to Keyes, it is this type of preemptive performance anxiety that is at the heart of what's wrong with college today. There's no room for reflection, practicing a thing until it's mastered, or exploring interests and pondering what makes a meaningful life.

"In order to succeed you have to be depressed, stressed, and anxious? That wasn't the deal. A liberal arts education was meant to include the ingredients of flourishing," Keyes says. "Kids ought to be asking, 'How can I lead a meaningful life?' rather than, 'How

"Being around people who share the same goals as you and are working toward greater things in a positive manner."



"Parents expect their children will become independent naturally, not realizing their over-involvement and doting hamstring that process."

can I be successful?' In the way happiness has been inextricably linked to money in our society, success has been linked to GPA and the ranking of the college you get into."

Keyes says it's the system that is to blame. "Everyone is saying the kids are the problem. They're vulnerable, they're weak, they're narcissistic. Well, they reflect the society they are in and they are trying to achieve what is valued. It's our fault—the adults in the system."

Says Carson: "Parenting practices have changed. Society has changed. Technology has changed. All have both positive results and in many cases some unintentional and negative consequences when taken to an extreme.

In our move to be more engaged in our parenting styles and to help our children experience so much of what the world has to offer in sports, the arts, academics, and recreation, we have sometimes overstructured their lives and not given them the freedom to just play with peers, make up their own rules, fail—even *not* to fill up their schedules. The result when taken to the extreme is that students come to college less able to manage their own care, to recover from failures, or to problem-solve around obstacles."



“Creativity takes time. It requires reflection. Creativity means you make lots of mistakes before you do something brilliant.”

Excessively sheltered childhoods can make the transition from home to college more difficult than it used to be, says Margaret Praytor, associate director of Furman’s Counseling Center. Parents who are overly involved in their children’s lives—intervening in roommate squabbles and course selections, calling deans and teachers to complain about grades and assignments, and even negotiating employment packages after graduation—short-circuit the kinds of experiences that build resiliency. “Parents are sometimes too quick to fix things,” she says.

“There’s so much freedom at college,” adds Watt, “when, just one year before, as a senior in high school, I still had to ask permission to use the bathroom.”

The 2012 book *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today’s College Student* by Illinois State University professor Diane R. Dean makes the case that parents shielding their children from all struggles and consequences are actually setting them up for trouble. “The message to students from their parents is, ‘You’re not capable. I will do it for you.’ They’re not developing appropriate social skills or coping mechanisms. This is the generation that was never allowed to skin their knees...and nobody ever fails,” writes Dean.

Parents seem to expect that their children will become independent naturally, not realizing that their over-involvement and

dotting hamstring that process, says Praytor. She is now working with students at Furman to build experiences that foster independent decision-making, hoping to bolster self-confidence and the ability to meet obstacles in life with resourcefulness and skill.

A goal of The Resiliency Project is to glean insight into better ways students can master self-management and healthy methods of coping with stress, competition, and the inevitability of mistakes.

“Students will face stress in the unstructured environment of college,” says Carson. “It is important they develop resilience to handle the independence it provides. At a place like Furman, there are many talented students who were at the top of their high school class. A Furman education is challenging, and these students will likely learn some new letters of the alphabet when it comes to grades, but it does not mean they are not learning. [Learning resilience] will prepare them for life after Furman where they may not have the resources to see them through the tough times.”

Noting perfectionism and a hurried education process destroy creativity and contemplation, educators agree today’s system leaves no room for students to try new things and explore their strengths.

“I don’t think students 20 years ago felt as many obligations to be successful as they do today. We keep heaping things on their plates—that’s not enough, here’s another thing, here’s another,” observes Dr. Cole Barton, who has taught 31 years at Davidson College, where he is chairman of the department of psychology. “Back in the day, people followed Plato and Socrates around to learn something. We no longer have a reflective environment. I don’t know who’s talking to students about priorities. How thin can you spread yourself?” he asks.

“Creativity takes time,” Barton continues. “It requires some reflection. Creativity means you make lots of mistakes before you do something brilliant.”

Instead of discovering pursuits they are passionate about, experts say students today are locked in a pace going too fast to recognize the value of taking time.

“Things take as long as they take,” Barton asserts. “Calculus, a foreign language...there’s a lot of variability in people regarding how they learn. Much learning, much creating, conducting an experiment, these things don’t happen on a fine schedule.” Barton is worried that the essential values of hard work, grit, and persistence are being squeezed out of the education process.

“Somehow, students are getting the message that if they have to practice to get good, then they’re stupid,” he says.

Technology plays a role. Students agree with Barton’s observation that they have more information coming at them more rapidly than ever.

“The demands of technology literacy have gone up. And having to sort out all that information and its quality is more and more challenging,” Barton says.

“Live in intentional community.”

"Persistence, faith, continuous gratitude, and a little savoir faire combine to form resilience."

With email, texting, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat, and more, students say nonstop technology adds to their stress. Watt notes the pressure to document events on social media can create insecurity and isolation, especially for girls.

"If I go to a mixer or other function and I don't look or feel my best, it's broadcast on social media," Watt says. "I have friends who won't go if it's a rainy day because their pictures wouldn't look good on Instagram."

And with the modern obsession with technology, interpersonal skills can become stunted.

"We've kind of become cowards and hide behind the text," says Watt. "I wish we had more face-to-face interaction. I feel like older generations went through different situations that made them stronger and gave them better people skills."

"They handle conflict electronically," says Carson. "As bright as they are, they often do not have much experience in how to resolve conflict. We see roommate conflicts where students are sitting four feet apart and texting each other because they have difficulty with the face-to-face conflict communications." Carson is quick to add college students today have good minds, good hearts, and the desire to be leaders. "They're some of the best we've ever seen."

Take 19-year-old twins Brian and Reagan Gillette of Amarillo, Texas.

In 2010, one day before they began high school in the ninth grade, their father murdered their mother in their home. They discovered the scene, were involved in their father's trial, and somehow missed only one day of high school. They were wedged between the dual pressures of helping to raise their two younger sisters and helping their aging grandparents care for them.

Throughout, Brian and Reagan never lost focus on the importance of grades and sports, a value ingrained by their mother. They graduated high school last May—Brian, valedictorian, and Reagan, salutatorian—amid a sea of academic and athletic accolades.

"When Mom died, I wasn't going to let that get in the way of things," Brian says. He and Reagan attribute their motivation to the sense their mom is watching and the desire to make her proud. Brian begins Texas A&M this fall and Reagan will attend the University of Oklahoma. Both say they've become stronger and more determined because of their struggles and loss.

"Life's significant challenges may discourage some individuals, but others may feel like they have to work harder," says Stephen Dawes, director of Furman's Counseling Center. "Just as you have to put the muscle under stress if it's going to grow, it makes sense to me a certain amount of adversity may be beneficial to increasing the ability to adapt and problem solve and never give up."

Briana Jackson's family also suffered loss and setbacks during her high school years, though not as tragic as the Gillettes'. She too kept focused through adversity; nevertheless, she is advising her younger sister to pick a less competitive college.

"Duke has prestige, but at what price? It's a lot of stress—even the people making better grades than me feel the same way. You have self-doubt. And fear—fear of disappointing your parents, fear of disappointing people from your high school, fear of not getting where you thought you would, fear of not succeeding, fear of not getting a good job."

Jackson says her struggle with anxiety continues, but she's used her college experience to redefine her identity, emphasizing a kind of resiliency that may be a better life skill than perfect grades. "When you lose the idea you're the best, you realize it's not the

only thing defining you or your worth as a person. Your character grows," she says. "I used to think my GPA was a window into my character. But since I don't have that anymore, how I come across face-to-face is more important. I have to show my character in how I talk to people, in being a better person."

THE HOW TO'S OF RESILIENCY

How can parents—and young adults themselves—build resiliency? A few ways, says Dr. Doug Coatsworth, professor at Colorado State University and a research psychologist specializing in programs to build resilience in children, youth, and families.

TEACH EMPATHY.... "Kids who are empathic create warmer, deeper relationships with others and those relationships are going to come back to them when they experience trauma," says Coatsworth.

TAKE TIME TO PLAY.... No matter the age, we all need unstructured time, which teaches self-regulation, self-organization, and self-management—skills that help smooth transitions from one environment to another. Avoid cramming your life and the lives of young people with too many scheduled activities.

TURN OFF THE NOISE.... "It's overwhelming, the amount of information we're exposed to constantly these days," Coatsworth says. "Unplugging is important. We get back to basics, to what truly matters."

LIMIT EXPOSURE TO DISTURBING NEWS.... Too much upsetting news can be traumatizing and paralyzing for anyone, but especially for children. "Don't avoid negative things altogether, but be sure to address them in a developmentally appropriate way."

GIVE EVERY CHILD A DUTY.... Whether it's household chores or responsibilities for younger siblings, assigning roles to kids across age spectrums creates the sense they are valuable members of the family or classroom, while building purpose.

PROMOTE A MALLEABLE PERSPECTIVE.... The fixed mindset sees abilities as unchangeable, whereas the malleable mindset sees natural ability as only one factor in success. "Kids with malleable mindsets understand that with effort and persistence they'll improve," Coatsworth says. The fixed mindset crushes creativity and holds children and adults back from trying new things. Coatsworth suggests adding the word "yet" to statements of inadequacy. "So 'I can't do that' becomes 'I can't do that yet.' It changes the mindset for kids and helps them think, 'If I keep working on this, I'll be able to dribble the ball or do these math problems or play the piano.'"

DON'T OVERPROTECT.... Disappointment isn't all that bad, Coatsworth says. "We do kids a disservice by solving their problems too quickly and by trying to make sure they avoid consequences. By confronting difficult things and coming out on the other side, they know they can adapt and handle difficult things. It is important to build opportunities for kids to overcome challenges and for them to build emotional skills to deal with disappointments."